

UK National Education Union and #SchoolCuts hold Together for Education rally

Tom Pearce
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The June 21 #SchoolCuts campaign meeting at Westminster Hall in London was billed as a day to gather “together for education, a day of celebration, campaign planning and rallying.”

The main organizer was the National Education Union (NEU), with support from the Association of School and Colleges and Leaders (ASCL), National Union of Head Teachers (NUHT), the GMB, Unison and Unite.

The event was held at great expense. Westminster Great Hall has a capacity of 2,000. However, there were a significant number of empty seats despite high profile attendees Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and Layla Moran, MP of the Liberal Democrats.

Chair Mary Bousted introduced Khan, who gave hollow support to the campaign with the statement that “We are with you,” and referencing the London Challenge, “a secondary school improvement programme that ran in the capital from 2003 to 2011.” Khan blamed Conservative government austerity for the problems in London’s school funding, ignoring the fact that Labour councils, as instructed by Corbyn in a 2015 letter, have dutifully imposed every cut demanded by the Conservative government.

Other speakers addressed the conditions faced by schools, the campaign so far and what had been achieved.

Conservative councillor James McInnes representing F40, a cross party group, explained how they were seeking to persuade the government to commit to an annual £2.3 billion increase in education funding.

Emma Knight from the National Governors Association (NGA), said that schools are reducing the

subjects being offered to pupils due to the cuts and that “schools were subsidising their budgets out of their reserves, which are now drying up.” Expenditure on buildings was “the first to go.”

Knight explained that cuts to key services in the community were having a detrimental effect on resources in schools. However, her solution was for teachers to “ask your MP” into their school to see the damage that has already been done so that more politicians could see the horrors that schools are facing day to day.

New general secretary elect of the UCU, Dr. Jo Grady, spoke about the mismanagement of university and colleges and focused on the privatization of education, citing the past struggles of junior doctors and protests over the government’s divisive Prevent program that is supposed to identify possible radicalization and terror suspects within education.

She said nothing of the betrayals of her own union of the lecturers strike last year, where UCU members criticised the union’s role in suppressing the strikes and pushing through a deal that was rejected by many.

Grady was followed by Paul Whiteman of the National Union of Head Teachers (NUHT) and Geoff Barton of the Association of Schools and College Leaders (ASCL) who both talked about the appalling conditions that members work under. Barton spoke of “action on behalf of the children,” but said that his organization was not “political” but spoke for its members. He said that the campaign was not about funding but a matter of “social justice.”

“The only ways that [head teachers] are going to make savings now is losing staff. As a result class sizes are being increased. The cuts have made the vulnerable

more vulnerable.”

A film was run highlighting #SchoolCuts activities with supporter of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Joint General Secretary of the NEU, Kevin Courtney, reporting that since 2015 its website has been able to support campaigns and have won £1.3 billion in extra funding for schools and an extra £350 million for Special educational needs and disability (SEND) provision. However, these sums are nowhere near enough to reverse the cuts that have already taken place.

The NEU’s data analyst, Andrew Baisley stated that there needs to be an increase in education funding with £2.3 billion being needed now in 2019 and by 2022 £3.4billion. A rising population and the increase of class sizes is having a detrimental effect on the level of education that is being offered and not enough is being done.

Delegates at the event were asked to think about where their power lay, in a group task, to organize the next campaign. This turning point in the campaign involves waiting for the autumn budget statement and the local elections in 2020 to put pressure on politicians to change their minds on increasing school funding. In other words, putting faith in a group of politicians who have so far fallen short of any of the demands of the unions.

No strike action was even mentioned by any union leader considering that it has been four years since the #SchoolCuts website was set up. The event was run as a recruitment drive for the unions, but most protests have been organized by parents from communities that have seen the cuts first hand. Invites to the event were extended to parents and governors in order to bring the protests back under the umbrella of the trade unions.

This was buttressed by the presence of Corbyn as the keynote speaker. He reiterated Labour’s commitment to the scrapping of standard assessment tests (SATs) at primary level and the creation of a National Education Service (NES). He made no commitment to an increase in funding under a Labour government. Instead, he stated, “It’s the involvement of the entire community in supporting our schools and our teachers that can make sure we can put the pressure on this government, in the Autumn Spending Statement, to refund the schools properly—so that we don’t go into next year with yet another cut in spending per head within our

schools.”

Corbyn added to great applause that he wanted to “take the corporations out of the classroom” by ending the academies and “free schools” programme. However, the WSWS has previously reported that Shadow Education Secretary Rayner said she is not “fixated on local authorities” as the solution to education. “Most parents, including me, are interested in a good school that their kids can go to. They don’t care what it’s called, quite frankly.”

In a tweet after his closing speech, Courtney declared, “We haven’t got any money for our children in schools yet. Promises have been written on the side of the bus that has turned out to be nothing. The strength of our campaign has brought politicians from all parties to this event. The tide has turned! We can win this.”

There was no mention whatsoever of the ongoing teacher strikes in North America and in other countries, or of any campaign based on uniting the struggles of teachers, college and university staff against the cuts to funding.

The empty rhetoric from Corbyn and his trade union and pseudo-left supporters will not sustain schools. The fight for the right to a free, state-provided education is being shackled to the hopes of the Labour Party winning the 2022 local elections. Beyond that the unions are at a loss.



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